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AUTHOR Murphy, Karen L.
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ABSTRACT

Case study methodology was used to provide an in-depth examination of influences on distance learners' achievement attributions in order to gather data about educational orientation, study approaches, and beliefs about success and failure. The four subjects were drawn from 15 first-year distance learners pursuing degrees at Anadolu University's Open Education Faculty (OEF) in Eskisehir, Turkey. Together, these subjects had characteristics that mirrored the population of first-year OEF students. Data were gathered over an 11-month period through questionnaires and interviews. It was found that the four kinds of attributions usually tested in attribution research (effort, ability, luck, and task difficulty) were not altogether appropriate for Turkish distance learners, who perceived a wide range of learning conditions to be salient factors in their anticipated success and failure. The students attributed their success both to effort and to a variety of positive conditions, whereas they attributed failure primarily to negative conditions in the learning environment. The study demonstrated the complexities of the cross-cultural application of attribution theory in a distance learning context, particularly in a developing country where Islamic influences of patronage and an oral tradition prevail. (57 references) (KC)

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Patronage and an Oral Tradition: Influences on Attributions of Distance Learners in a Traditional Society (A Qualitative Study)

Karen L. Murphy

Kansas State University

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Karen L. Murphy
Division of Continuing Education
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66506
(913) 532-5686
FAX: (913) 532-5637
BITNET: KMURPHY @ KSUVM.KSU.EDU

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that perceptions of success and failure among people in non-Western cultures may be quite different from those reported by people in Western cultures. The context that gave rise to attribution theory (Weiner, 1974, 1979) and its main experimental base is Western, predominantly American, white, and adult male (Bond, 1983; Duda & Allison, 1989; Little, 1987; Maehr & Nicholls, 1980). Maehr described the prevailing view of achievement in the U.S. as "an individualistic and totally self-serving thing--a person achieves on his own and perhaps at the expense of someone else" (1977, p. 91). Many researchers take it for granted that notions of achievement and success involve competition.

Such views, however, ignore cultural differences like cooperativeness and interdependence and group rather than individual goals of success. The Navajos--a group-oriented culture--saw success as "helping the 'People'" or "when the team wins" (Allison & Duda, 1982). Fletcher and Ward (1988) noted that although evidence for the group-serving bias (Hewstone & Jaspers, 1982) as opposed to the self-serving bias (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980) is inconsistent across cultures, similar attribution processes underpin the group-serving bias.

Weiner (1986) reviewed a study (Weiner & Kukla, 1970) that was replicated in several countries: Brazil (Rodrigues, 1980),

England (Rogers, 1980), Germany (Rest, Nierenberg, Weiner, & Heckhausen, 1973), India (Esware, 1972), and Iran (Salili, Maehr, & Gilmore, 1976). Although the results indicated that effort leads to reward and lack of effort leads to punishment, the meanings that individuals attach to such concepts as "reward" and "punishment" are likely to be quite different from one culture to another.

Success and failure attributions may also differ among students learning in a typical face-to-face environment (in which teachers and the classroom context provide familiar support structures) and distance learners (who are separated in time and space from their teachers and classrooms and must rely on printed materials in combination with other forms of communication technologies). Distance learners, who are isolated both geographically from their instructors and often in terms of time because of employment or personal situations, do not have access to the familiar forms of motivation that instructors normally provide, or even the social contacts that are associated with face-to-face learning. As a result, those who are learning at a distance must be internally motivated, or the system must motivate them externally.

Associations between attributions, underlying dimensions, feelings, and behavior may be particularly important in distance education settings where adult learners "vote with their feet"

and dropout rates tend to be higher than in face-to-face systems.[1] An estimated ten million students in both industrialized and developing countries throughout the world are studying in degree programs at a distance (Kaye, 1988) in what has been viewed as "the most striking development in higher education structures in recent decades..." (Keegan & Rumble, 1982, p. 24).

Distance learners in developing countries in particular are products of somewhat authoritarian face-to-face educational programs. Thus, distance learners who are still in transition from such traditional secondary school programs to distance education systems often have special needs because they are unprepared to learn independently. Developing countries such as China, Costa Rica, and Turkey have followed the example of the British Open University to provide distance education at the university level at a low cost through existing or available technologies (Jianshu, 1988; McIsaac, Murphy, & Demiray, 1988; Rumble, 1981).

First-year distance learners at the Turkish Open Education Faculty (OEF) must make a hasty transition from an authoritarian, traditional teacher-centered form of education to one in which they must function independently as they learn from textbooks and, optionally, from instructional television programs and a

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[1] Dropout rates in distance education systems have been documented from a low of 28% at the British Open University to a high of 80% at the Fernuniversitat, West Germany (Bartels & Willen, 1985; Doerfert, Schuemer, & Tomaschewski, 1989).

limited offering of face-to-face lectures. This transition occurs in a predominantly Islamic culture rooted in an oral tradition, where students are accustomed to a system in which they derive knowledge from a *hoca* (Teacher, or One Who Transmits Knowledge). The *hoca* concept still prevails in modern Turkey, where teachers and professors are held in high esteem and make all educational decisions about what is to be learned and how it will be accomplished (Kazamias, 1966; Weiker, 1981). Like other distance learners, OEF students learn primarily from textbooks in the isolated environment of their homes, without the opportunity to ask questions of a knowledgeable person. This study investigated the factors that first-year distance learners in Turkey perceive as responsible for their success and failure, in an attempt to determine the sociocultural influences on those perceptions.

METHOD

This research used case study methodology to provide an in-depth examination of a phenomenon in its real-life context through multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1981). The case study approach to research on influences on distance learners' achievement attributions represents an attempt to gather in-depth data about educational orientation, study approaches, and beliefs about success and failure, for the purpose of contributing to a broader conceptualization of attributions of distance learners in a traditional society. Given the nature of the research

questions, the unique circumstances involved in conducting research as a foreigner in Turkey, and the results of a search of the literature that included an investigation of social science research methodologies used in Turkey, the case study method was selected.[3]

The four case studies included in this discussion constitute part of a larger study reported elsewhere (Murphy, 1989a, 1989b). To ascertain across a wide base the issues that the four case studies identified as important to distance learning, the research design of the larger study included investigations with 58 subjects and the 35 second-stage respondents to a questionnaire. This report includes only the case studies.

Subjects

The subjects were drawn from the population of first-year distance learners pursuing degrees at the Open Education Faculty (OEF) and living in the city of Eskişehir, Turkey. Fifteen students were involved in a series of observations and interviews during an eleven month period; four of these students were later selected for in-depth case study. These four students were selected on the basis of personal referrals and responses to an initial questionnaire administered to 58 students as they

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[3] It has been recognized that qualitative research methods parallel the strong oral and narrative traditions prevalent in many developing countries, where "numbers provided in interviews or reports are best regarded as estimates, not as precise indicators" (Cuthbert, 1985, p. 30).

registered with the OEF at the beginning of the academic year. The four were not randomly selected from the sample of 15. They were chosen because together they had the characteristics that mirrored the population of first-year OEF students (in terms of age, gender, and field of study) and provided sufficient data for "rich descriptions."

All four students were in their first year as distance learners with the OEF, and, like the majority of their fellow distance learners, were employed. To enroll in a Turkish university, they were required to have completed secondary school and have earned passing scores on the University Entrance Examinations. They all lived in Eskişehir, which is a city of approximately 500,000 people in mid-western Anatolia and is the headquarters of the OEF at Anadolu University. Two students were male, two female; two of them were pursuing degrees in business administration, while the other two were in the economics program. Three of them were graduates of vocational-technical secondary schools, while one graduated from a traditional secondary school.

Procedures

Data gathering took place over an eleven month period, extending from the beginning of the academic year, just prior to registration in October, until the following September, before the make-up examinations were given. During this time I lived on the Anadolu University campus, where I both conducted research

and taught a class in one of the face-to-face departments at the university. Triangulation of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 1984) was obtained through multiple sources.

Background information included: demographic data on first-year OEF students and documentation on the distance education system; data on all 58 students' University Entrance Examination scores and their final course grades; and access to the various instructional elements (i.e., textbooks, face-to-face lectures, television programs, and midterm and final examinations). Data on the four case studies included two structured interviews and a series of open-ended discussions (meetings with the students occurred between 20 and 33 times on individual and small group bases); two questionnaires; observations of the three students who attended the face-to-face lectures on campus (which I attended on an average of once or twice a week); and viewing on an average of twice a week the instructional television programs, which were broadcast daily over Turkey's primary channel.

The **Initial Questionnaire**, given at the beginning of the academic year, elicited demographic information, reasons for participation in the OEF, and information about whether or not the student would be willing to participate further in the study. In this questionnaire, 58 students ranked as many as eight reasons for enrolling in the OEF. This questionnaire was based on questions included in both a pilot study questionnaire and an annual survey given to returning OEF students.

The Initial Interview, which was intended to obtain demographic information and attitudes toward distance learning, consisted of open-ended questions and contained probing follow-up questions that were designed to elicit specific information about students' secondary school background, current employment situation, attitudes about being a distance learner, and plans for studying in the OEF. These interviews with 15 students were held at the beginning of the academic year, either before or during registration or within one month after registration.

The **Midterm Questionnaire**, administered to the same 58 students, was an attitude survey consisting of both multiple choice and open-ended questions about each instructional component of the OEF (textbooks, television, face-to-face lessons, and examinations) and about students' expectations of and attributions for both expected and unexpected success and failure on their midterm examinations. Items 28 and 29 asked about the factors to which students would attribute their success (a higher mark than they expected) and failure (a lower mark than they expected) on any of their midterm examinations. The choices included: effort/ability, task difficulty, luck, conditions, and other. Students were also asked to respond to one of two open-ended questions about the aspects of their home and outside environment that they felt were responsible for their success (Item 35) or failure (Item 36). This questionnaire was administered in mid-April, following the midterm examinations and prior to the time that the results arrived in the mail.

The Significant Events Interview was intended to elicit retroactive conceptions of the significant events of the 15 first-year OEF students and the accompanying behaviors and feelings that they associated with these particular events. Questions were asked from a flow diagram depicting both official (e.g., "registration") and unofficial (e.g., "began to study") events. The students were shown the diagram and then asked to describe their behavior around the events and the feelings that they remembered associating with each of the events. These interviews were conducted during a six week period after the students received their midterm examination marks and before taking their final examinations in June.

Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research begins as the researcher initiates the study and continues during data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Verbal and written responses from interviews, discussions, observations, and questionnaires were first translated into English, transcribed, and entered into the computer. The first stage of analysis involved coding of these data. The coding categories, which were suggested by the framework of attribution theory (Weiner, 1979), initially included: significant events, feelings associated with the events, situational determinants, attributions for success and failure, and specific behaviors. The codes were refined as more types of data were discovered. Following the coding, the next

step involved writing four individual case studies and drawing up individual summary tables.

With the aid of an indexing file on a word processor, the next level of analysis involved cross-case analysis on the basis of patterns and themes common to all four cases. These patterns and themes included: attributions for success and for failure, according to responses based on type of question (multiple choice or open-ended); background and sociocultural determinants of their attributions; their educational orientations, based on reasons for enrolling in the OEF, and study approaches (deep or surface level approach); feelings related to their success or failure attributions; and expectations for success and failure on future OEF examinations. A final level of analysis involved the display of qualitative data in the form of tables and charts, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984).

RESULTS

The results of this study relate both to the personal and sociocultural influences on first-year distance learners' attributions for success and failure and to the attributions themselves. The analysis focuses primarily on the case studies in the context of their distance learning environment. A description of the Turkish distance learning milieu is included to provide a context for the descriptions of the case studies. A discussion follows of the influences of patronage and an oral tradition on the students' success and failure attributions.

The Open Education Faculty

The OEF has been operating since late 1982, and in 1987-88 served over 130,000 students throughout Turkey and Northern Cyprus (which was approximately one-third of the total number of students at the 28 universities) (*1987-88 ögretim yılı yükseköğretim istatistikleri*, 1987). Of Turkey's estimated population of 55 million in 1987, nearly one out of every thousand people (54,000) was a first-year OEF student. The operations of the OEF are administered by the Central Administrative Bureau in Eskişehir with the support of 19 service bureaus (see the map in Figure 1). The system operates on a full academic year schedule that begins in October and finishes in June.

Figure 1 about here

Instruction in two fields of study--business administration and economics--is provided primarily through sets of textbooks sent to the students by mail. The printed materials are supplemented by: broadcast television programs of eight of the nine subjects; radio programs for one subject (English); a handful of Video Education Centers offering weekly instruction in English throughout the country; and weekly face-to-face lectures on four out of nine subjects, held at 19 universities in 24 cities.

Achievement is assessed solely on the basis of two multiple-choice examinations given each year--a midterm in March (which counts for 30% of the final grade), and a final in June (which counts for the remaining 70% of the final grade); students may re-take final examinations in September if they fail any of their nine subjects. Examinations are given in the same 24 locations as the face-to-face lectures.

OEF students can do most if not all of their studying from their homes according to their own schedules. They must, however, visit the nearest OEF bureau to register each year and go to the nearest OEF center at least two weekends to take their examinations. According to administration guidelines (Bozok, 1988), OEF students are expected to spend 80 to 85 percent of their time studying their textbooks and 15 to 20 percent of their time with the television and face-to-face lessons. Although television now reaches nearly every town and village, OEF broadcasts in 1987-88 began at 6:30 or 7:00 am, which was reportedly an inconvenient time for many students.[3] Students who want to attend the face-to-face lectures, which are offered in four of the nine subjects, must do so in one of the 24 cities where they are offered.[4] Interaction with OEF instructors is

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[3] Results of the Midterm Questionnaire indicated that nearly half of the 35 respondents reported that they never watched any OEF television programs, just over half watched the programs at least some of the time, and no students reported watching the programs all the time.

[4] Results of the Midterm Questionnaire indicated that nearly 65% of the 35 respondents reported attending at least some of the face-to-face lectures, while the remaining 35% reported never

possible only during the 90 minute face-to-face lectures, which in Eskişehir are held on the Anadolu University campus in an auditorium that seats 350 people.

Case Studies

Ismail[5] was a single 25-year old male who worked as a civil servant in one of the larger offices of the Open Education Faculty on the Anadolu University campus. The pace of work was erratic: sometimes they experienced a dearth of work and could drink tea and chat with each other, while at other times they had to work overtime--on weekends and often until late at night. Ismail received high marks on the University Entrance Examinations. He was pursuing a university degree primarily for the status that it would bring him as a civil servant:

> I chose to study business administration because I thought it would help my work and I might increase my status as a manager...And, I will be able to earn more money. (Initial Interview, Nov. 3, 1987)

He reported a vocational orientation, having selected distance study in order to continue working while pursuing his university degree, as reflected in responses in the Initial Interview.

> I am working and cannot attend a university where attendance is compulsory, so I both work and study here at the OEF. (Initial Interview, November 3, 1987)

He also reflected an intellectual interest: his personal view of success, which he described as passing "with high marks, not just

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attending any of them.

[5] The names of the four case studies are fictitious.

passing" (Discussion, May 9, 1988), signifies a concern with more than just the degree. He wanted to "learn something new rather than just passing" his examinations and reported having given thought to continuing with his studies after completing his undergraduate degree.

Ismail, a graduate of a regular secondary school (a night school), maintained that his background in mathematics was better than that of graduates of vocational-technical schools, who are prepared minimally in mathematics. His responses to the Midterm Questionnaire, however, indicated a lack of confidence in doing well. Any unexpected success in his midterm examinations would be due to his own effort and ability; failure, on the other hand, would be attributed only to lack of effort ("because I didn't study hard enough"). When given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions in the Midterm Questionnaire, Ismail responded only to the one about failure, suggesting that he felt unsuccessful in general. He attributed his expected failure in his midterm examinations to unfavorable conditions in his learning environment:

> The reason that I will be unsuccessful is that I couldn't find enough time to study, both because I was too busy at work before the examinations, and because of some problems at home. (Item 36)

Ismail's study approach did not change significantly throughout the year. He remained a diligent, hard-working student, although he stopped attending the face-to-face lectures in May. In the period following the midterm examinations Ismail felt unsuccessful, attributing his anticipated failure to a

variety of conditions over which he perceived as having no control. In spite of these misgivings, Ismail earned high marks on his midterm examinations, and at the end of the year he earned the third highest grade point average (66%) of all of the sample of 58.

Mehmet was a single 19-year old male who, as a student supported by a university scholarship, worked part-time in various capacities for the university. He lived at home with his family, one of whom was a twin, and, like Mehmet, a first-year OEF student. The youngest of the four case studies, Mehmet graduated from a vocational-technical school the previous June. His University Entrance Examination scores were barely high enough to enter the OEF in economics; accordingly, he acknowledged that he was weakest in mathematical subjects.

Mehmet indicated on the Initial Questionnaire that he enrolled in the OEF for two reasons: so that he could both work and study, and because his low scores on the University Entrance Examinations left him no option. He initially planned to take the University Entrance Examinations again and transfer to another university, explaining that although he was majoring in economics, he was more interested in learning English so that he "could be more helpful with tourists." His point of view had shifted within a month, when he discussed advantages of being an OEF student:

> As you see, while I am attending the OEF, I can take courses in English, computers, and telecommunications.

> In the end, I will have earned a diploma equal to other diplomas. These two factors will increase the possibility of my finding a job. Besides, right now I am able to study and work at the same time and therefore help my family financially. (Initial Interview, December 3, 1988)

He recognized that "one should know something extra besides English" and intended to achieve a higher status in society through "self-sacrifice"; he was prepared to "suffer," because, as he explained, "it's a matter of my future."

To Mehmet, success meant "high marks. A friend of mine, Ismail, is successful--he got high marks." Earlier, when I asked about the key to success, Mehmet responded that successful students follow a study plan consistently and take advantage of all the instructional elements of the OEF. Although Mehmet generally exuded optimism about his own success, his study approach seemed to waver between the real and the ideal. While his intentions were good, he seemed to have difficulty in living up to his goals. He anticipated that the study plan he had conceptualized earlier would leave him with "no free time," yet on four occasions throughout the year I observed him talking with his friends outside of the OEF lecture auditorium and then leaving together rather than staying for the lectures. During the final examinations, I observed Mehmet drawing a design like a set of stairs with his answers on the answer sheet for one of the examinations.

Mehmet seemed to act in response to his friends' actions rather than on his own volition, revealing a strong need for affiliation. I asked him whether he had been attending the

lectures, to which he responded, "Yes, when my friends go." A few days before the midterm examinations, I asked him whether or not it was his practice to attend the lectures only when his friends did. He responded,

> I depend on my friends--I can't leave them. If they don't go, I don't want to go either. My mind is with them. For example, they may be playing *Okey* (a game) or talking, and I think about them. I can't pay attention to the lectures without my friends. That doesn't happen all the time, but almost all the time. (Discussion, March 22, 1988)

These examples indicate Mehmet's ability to make the most of settings that allowed him to be with his friends; additionally, they provide a view of his strong reliance on friendships in a distance learning system that typically provides few such opportunities.

Mehmet consistently predicted that he would be successful, both in our discussions and in his responses to the Midterm Questionnaire. In interviews and discussions, he attributed his success to the nature of distance education (which allows people like him to pursue degrees while working) and to his friends, whom he found helpful when he didn't understand a concept or when he wanted company. Unexpected failure would result from the difficulty of the task (he found the mathematical subjects most challenging) and from any lack of effort associated with those tasks.

Mehmet responded to the multiple-choice questions in the Midterm Questionnaire that he would attribute any unexpected success on his midterm examinations both to his own effort and

ability and to his positive study environment, while he would attribute unexpected failure only to his lack of effort or ability. He responded to both open-ended questions, attributing his expected success to sufficient study time and to the clearly written textbooks. He indicated that in the event of failure, however, he would be "totally responsible, because there isn't any reason for failure if one studies well."

A clue to the gap between Mehmet's reality and his conceptions of the ideal may lie in his words, "To succeed in something depends on one's own wishes. If I say I'll do something but I really don't want to do it, it won't work."

Ayşe was a single 24-year old female who worked as a civil servant in a small bank in the heart of the city. She lived at home with her closely knit family, as she would continue to do until marriage. Ayşe graduated from a vocational-technical school seven years before and earned high marks on the University Entrance Examinations--so high, in fact, that even she and her family were surprised. She selected the field of economics because of her banking interests.

Ayşe felt that a higher education degree was important to advance her career, preferably in another field. Her ideal job entailed working with computers in a setting where she could use her English language skills. In her first interview she explained:

> A university degree is very important in order to advance one's career. It's not so important how many

> qualifications you have. I decided that I could manage studying on top of working because the others here do, even though some of them are married. I'm still single, which is an advantage for me. That's why I began to study. (Initial Interview, December 21, 1987)

To Ayşe, success was merely passing: "I care about getting enough points only to pass the courses; I don't need anything else."

Ayşe's ideal plan was to study a bit as she went along. In reality, however, this approach was not feasible, given the pressures of her work:

> It is usually 8:00 or 9:00 pm when we finish our daily accounts and other duties. I'm most anxious about how I will study my lessons. Because I have such heavy duties all day long, I get very tired. It will be very difficult to sit down and study when I am so weary. We sometimes have to come here to work on weekends, and we also have overtime work. I thought that I would study in the early hours of the morning, but I don't think I can do that, because I'm just too tired to get up early. I can just barely get ready for work in the morning. (Initial Interview, December 21, 1987)

A few weeks before the midterm examinations, she figured that she had not yet adapted to being a distance learner: "Studying at home is difficult because I am not used to studying by myself; I just want to sleep when I get home."

Ayşe generally used a surface approach to her studies, primarily trying to memorize the information necessary for the examinations. She made minimal use of the access aids provided in the text: "When I studied economics, I just read and memorized the formulas; I didn't even look at the graphics." She complained that she couldn't prepare well for the midterm examinations, which included questions that were:

> completely different from the examples provided in the textbooks; the end-of-the unit questions are easy, but they didn't resemble the test questions. A fifty-year old man said the same thing after the examinations. (Discussion, April 9, 1988)

Ayşe learned primarily from her textbooks, even though she lived a short distance from the university campus; she was typical of many other single female students in being somewhat restricted from going out alone after dark (a family member generally walked her home from work). She enrolled in a supplementary mathematics course to correct her deficiencies and at the same time made use of her classmates' experience:

> If I hadn't attended the course and asked my friends there about the examinations, I wouldn't have known which units I was responsible for. (Discussion, April 9, 1988)

She perceived luck as a cause of both success and failure. When I visited her to look over her midterm examination results, she said that I really ought to congratulate her by giving her a *nazar boncuğu* (a blue bead that in Islamic cultures is believed to ward off the "evil eye" and thus bring good luck). Three days later, when I presented her with a nazar boncuğu, she immediately pinned it on her shirt, and remarked that she would wear it for "good luck." Her belief in the lucky talisman persisted: she showed me the nazar boncuğu pinned to her shirt on the day of her final examinations in June. She attributed her high marks to luck: "I was just lucky in mathematics and Turkish" (Significant Events Interview, May 26, 1988); and in the Midterm Questionnaire, she attributed unexpected failure to bad luck.

Any unexpected success on her midterm examinations would be the result of her own effort, however.

Ayşe responded to the open-ended question about causes of her anticipated failure only, which she attributed primarily to her work situation: "I didn't have enough time to study, I couldn't study efficiently because I was too tired from work, and I can't attend the face-to-face lectures because my work schedule doesn't permit it." In spite of her struggles to get adequate sleep at night, much less finding time to study her lessons, Ayşe successfully passed all her courses at the end of the year.

Bahar was a petite 33-year old woman who took pride in being the mother of a ten-year old son and four-year old daughter. Bahar's civil servant job was as a receptionist at a large bank. According to official records, she graduated from a vocational-technical school 13 years before, although she referred several times to an interval of 16 years between secondary school and university. Her marks on the University Entrance Examinations were the minimum required to enter the OEF in business administration.

Bahar valued a university degree for the increase in status and salary that she expected as a result. In addition to this vocational orientation, she suggested that the degree may have more "intangible values" than it has practical uses. She chose to enroll in the OEF so that she could continue working while pursuing a university degree.

To Bahar, passing marks were sufficient, although she expected to work harder during the first part of the following year (she wanted to earn "fantastic" marks on her midterm examinations to avoid having to study so hard for the final examinations). Unlike Ayşe, Bahar kept regular office hours (8:30 am to 5:30 pm) and was not required to work overtime. Bahar began to study her textbooks even before the face-to-face lectures and television lessons began, because she felt "inexperienced" with the system and feared that she would be unsuccessful in the examinations as a result. She felt additionally disadvantaged having been out of school for such a long time. She believed time to be the single most important factor in success: "Time is what's most important. If only we had more time..."

Bahar's role as a woman, and particularly as a mother, seemed to pervade her perceptions of learning. She was concerned with maintaining strong family ties while taking on additional challenges as a university student. As the only female OEF student working at the bank, her study time was more limited than that of her male co-workers: "Compared with them, I have more responsibilities, like looking after the children." She still managed to squeeze in a few minutes of study each day.

Bahar's study plan included reading the textbooks, watching most television lessons in the mornings before going to work (it became a "habit"), attending the mathematics lecture at the university on a weekly basis, and taking a supplemental course in

English once a week. She compared, somewhat wistfully, the OEF with the face-to-face educational system:

> I wouldn't be so fearful if it were face-to-face education. There I could ask my teacher whatever I didn't understand. But now I have to ask other more advanced students.
> (Initial Interview, January 8, 1988)

Like Ismail, Bahar found it difficult to predict her examination results before receiving an official assessment: "I hope I'll do well, but without seeing the results, I can't say anything." She responded similarly to a question in the Midterm Questionnaire about whether she felt she had prepared sufficiently for the midterm examinations: "I can't say anything before getting the results" (Item 25).

This reluctance was further evidenced by her quite limited responses to questionnaire items concerning attributions for success and failure and expectations for the future. In earlier sections she answered most multiple-choice questions and even responded to several of them in her own words, while in the final section she omitted most of the questions related to attributions.

Bahar hinted at critical differences between face-to-face and distance education in response to my question about the two types of education: "In general, I am responsible for my own marks, but in face-to-face education, a teacher can influence our marks." After learning that she had failed Turkish by only one point, she stated again and again how upset she was: "I am so distressed about it...it just wouldn't have happened in a face-

to-face environment." She explained that secondary school students who receive a borderline mark can usually make an "arrangement" with their teacher so that they don't fail; in the OEF, she pointed out, there isn't a teacher with whom they can negotiate.

Success to Bahar was generally due to the assistance and advice of her colleagues who were further along in the OEF program. She attributed failure, on the other hand, to her lack of experience as a distance learner, the negative learning conditions resulting from lack of time and her quadruple roles, and the nature of distance education (which doesn't allow the possibility of discussion of marks with an official person). I asked her why she thought she received lower results on her final examinations than she did on her midterms. Her response included two attributions to task difficulty and one to her test-taking strategy: "First, because the final examinations were assigned a weight of 70%, compared with the 30% weight given to the midterm examinations; second, because I answered the questions in the final examinations in order; and third, because the final examinations covered the entire book in each course, not just the first half."

DISCUSSION

The Influence of Patronage

Ismail, Mehmet, Ayşe, and Bahar, along with others of their fellow distance learners, exhibited a sense of uncontrollability,

or powerlessness in their apparent reluctance to act independently or to make statements about their expectations for future success. It may be remembered that Bahar did not respond to any Midterm Questionnaire items that related to attributions, nor did she respond to some similar questions in interviews or discussions. Based on her comments that "without seeing the examination results," she couldn't make any predictions and that she "wouldn't be so fearful" if it were face-to-face education, we may conjecture that her sense of powerlessness left little room for predictions. Similarly, on two occasions, Ismail declined to predict how he would perform: "The results will tell the story," he explained.

Though OEF students at times voiced concerns about their distance learning system, they seemed powerless to act on these concerns. Bahar, for example, explained that she wanted one of the face-to-face instructors to lecture more slowly:

> Last year a group of students asked the instructor to slow down. He probably thinks everybody understands, because we don't complain. The only way that I would dare complain to the instructor is by getting a group of people to do it together.
> (Discussion, Bahar, February 23, 1988)

In spite of her wishes to have her instructor speak more slowly, Bahar demonstrated a reluctance to approach him, even with the possible support of several like-minded first-year students. Ayşe's powerlessness was evident in her inability to make significant changes in her onerous work situation; she gave the impression of someone trapped in the present, yet striving to

earn a degree, which she believed would enable her to find a better position.

A central aspect of Turkish culture is the embodiment of "power distance"--the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in relationships and consider it normal (Hofstede, 1983, 1986). Implicit in each of those situations was a widespread acceptance of power relationships and of one's position in the hierarchy. Based on wide-scale research in Turkey (Frey, 1965), it was hypothesized that while individuals in certain cultures (e.g., mainstream America) find control by another "psychologically repugnant," to Turks it seems to be "rather mild" (p. 403). Accompanying this acceptance of position is a concomitant sense of powerlessness in being able to change either position or conditions on one's own. Perhaps because of the power distance that the first-year students felt from their more educated professor, they were unwilling to approach him with their concerns.

Concepts of power and controllability are associated with patronage, a system of reciprocal links of service and protection between individuals of unequal status (Gellner, 1977). In the Ottoman Empire (1453-1923), a society in which absolute authority was vested in the ruler, patronage (*intisap*) was a tacit relationship of mutual obligation whereby more powerful individuals offered security to those below them in exchange for loyalty and service. Patronage in Turkey may have had its origins in Islam, which infused all aspects of religious,

political, and civil life (Gibb & Bowen, 1957; Lewis, 1961; Shaw, 1976). The notion of submission to a higher order derives from the word *Islam*, which means "submission" (to the will of God) (Gibb & Bowen, 1957).

Patronage acts as a guide for acceptable behavior between people of unequal status, such as landowners and peasants, political leaders and followers, and professors and students. Patronage systems, which foster values of obedience, honor, and respect for authority, are evident in the educational system through students' respect and loyalty toward their professor. In traditional face-to-face education in Turkey, students offer their continuing loyalty and respect to their professor, or patron, and in return they receive knowledge and wisdom. It is the professor's responsibility to interpret text to students, just as it is the students' responsibility to memorize the words of their professor. Accompanying this unique relationship are the bonds of friendship and mutual assistance that typically form among the classmates (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

While students in traditional universities are likely to enjoy close friendships with their fellow students and form bonds of respect and loyalty with their professor, distance learners find themselves outside of this patronage system. Lacking access to such a group or professor, OEF students formulate their own

structures of alliances and cooperation, both within and outside of the OEF. Students like Mehmet, for example, conceived of face-to-face lectures primarily as social gatherings. Others like Ayşe, unable to participate in the face-to-face lectures, found classmates in supplemental courses to be useful sources in penetrating the "hidden curriculum" (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972) of the OEF. Still others, like Bahar, relied heavily on the assistance and advice of co-workers and other more advanced students. Group ethos was evident from students' saving seats for each other in the often over-crowded lecture auditorium at Anadolu University. Early arrivals spread their books and notebooks along the table in front of several chairs in approximately the same spot before each weekly lecture.

Few opportunities in the OEF may exist even for a short-term patron, or *torpil* (derived from the word *torpedo* and implying an influential or powerful contact).[6] A distance learner in Turkey receives official information by mail and has little opportunity for face-to-face contacts. Ayşe, for example, was reluctant to telephone the OEF Bureau to learn which textbook units would be included in the midterm examinations--perhaps because she had no torpil at the Bureau, she eventually turned to friends in her supplemental mathematics class, claiming that if hadn't been for them, she wouldn't have known which units to study.

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[6] One of the weekly articles about the OEF in the *Hürriyet* Newspaper was titled *Açıköğretim'de torpil yok*, which means, "There isn't a torpil in the OEF." (*Hürriyet*, May 30, 1988, p. 33).

In summary, OEF students function outside of the traditional patronage system. They operate in an authoritarian hierarchy reminiscent of Ottoman times but without the bonds of loyalty and honor with an esteemed professor and are unable to form close friendships with classmates. Without these bonds, it is probably more difficult for these students to locate a torpil within the academic bureaucracy than it is for traditional university students. Distance learners cannot argue with a computer and thus wouldn't attribute their low marks to teachers as they may have done in face-to-face education.

The Influence of an Oral Tradition

Turkey's roots in an oral tradition may be yet another influence on OEF students' achievement attributions. Those who live in cultures with strong oral roots are likely to express themselves in terms of practical situations rather in abstract terms (Ong, 1982). Furthermore, they emphasize rote memorization and the sacredness of text. Such factors are likely to have strong impact on new OEF students who are suddenly faced with the responsibility of learning independently from textbooks and expressing themselves in abstract multiple-choice examinations.

Although the Islamic tradition emphasizing rote learning and memorization (Kazamias, 1966; Weiker, 1981) precludes much interaction with text, distance learners are required to demonstrate their achievement, based on an interaction primarily with their textbooks, without the familiar social structure of

traditional education. Perhaps as a result of her elementary and secondary school experiences that emphasized rote memorization, Ayşe complained that the OEF midterm examinations contained examples that were different from those in her textbook. As if an unspoken right had been violated, she queried, "How are we expected to answer the questions if we haven't seen them before?" Educational experiences requiring rote memorization rather than an application of knowledge are likely to perpetuate surface learning, as Mehmet, Ayşe, and Bahar exhibited.

In the OEF, textbooks become the substitute for the esteemed teacher in traditional face-to-face education. Distance learners have at least two ways to cope with the phenomenon of their absent teacher: they may use the textbook itself as a substitute for the missing teacher, and they find other means to assist them in the distance learning process. Because the textbook itself is expository and authoritative--like a lecture given by a teacher--students can react to the book as they would to a teacher: they focus on the content to memorize facts for their examinations. The situation is most critical for the first-year students who are still learning how to be distance learners: older ones like Bahar are still unaccustomed to formal study, while the younger ones like Mehmet are closer to their educational background with its traditional face-to-face methods.

The findings suggest that first-year distance learners, who are faced with the challenge of pursuing a university degree as a full-time student with a full-time job, tend to reconceptualize

their roles as student-employee and their perceptions of the distance learning system.

A Reconfiguration of the OEF

The plight has already been recognized of the new OEF student, who exists outside of the traditional patronage system and must take university courses in a largely text-based environment--frequently as an older, employed student with a background at a vocational-technical school. Turkish students, like many others, tend to operate in a context of self-serving bias (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980), in which people take credit for success and deny responsibility for failure. Turkish students are said to attribute high marks to their own efforts (they frequently say *aldım*, which means "I got it" or "I earned it") and low marks to the teacher that assigned the marks (they often say *verdi*, which means "he/she gave it to me"). Results of an oral survey with 12 face-to-face Anadolu University students indicated that students often try to justify their failure by saying, "I didn't earn this low mark; the teacher gave it to me--I don't deserve it."

When entering a distance learning environment where teachers aren't normally present, however, students attribute success and failure differently. Some, like Ismail and Mehmet, ascribed their success to intrinsic causes (such as effort, or effort/ability), while failure more often was perceived as the result of such extrinsic causes as luck and a variety of

conditions in their new learning context. The conditions that the four case studies identified included: other people (e.g., torpil, helper, friend), the nature of distance learning, personal problems, work schedules, and gender and role issues.

As a result, these students were observed to reconceptualize, or reconfigure their learning environments to meet their educational and emotional needs. In this reconfigured system, students still learn primarily from their textbooks, but they re-define their contexts to take advantage of the instructional elements that they can incorporate into their busy lives. Like Mehmet, Ayşe, and Bahar, they tend to establish new bonds or strengthen existing ones with their colleagues from work and with friends from supplemental classes that they may attend. They obtain information about the OEF's hidden curriculum from the OEF Bureau, local newspapers, and frequently through a torpil. Figure 3 illustrates the reconfigured OEF system from the first-year OEF student perspective.

Figure 3 about here

Because the students themselves redesign their learning environment, the reconfigured OEF system has the potential for meeting students' particular needs. One of these needs is for affiliation, which is critical both for distance learners in general who tend to be isolated (Moore, 1986), and for Turks in particular, who share values of group ethos and close kinship

ties (Andrews & Markoff, 1987; Kağıtçıbaşı, 1982, 1985). The face-to-face lectures may be especially important to students living near one of the 24 instructional centers: they may try to identify with an academic institution and thereby avoid feelings of isolation.

Students like Mehmet attended the face-to-face lectures for the increased opportunity to be with their friends. Some students took supplemental classes to sharpen their skills in certain areas (as Mehmet did with his English class) or to compensate for perceived deficiencies in their secondary school backgrounds (as Ayşe and Bahar did). In many cases, these classes offered more than just the skills and knowledge that the students sought; they also provided friendship opportunities and the possibility of developing bonds with an instructor.

CONCLUSIONS

The case study descriptions of four first-year Open Education Faculty students attempted to portray the emic point of view of what it means to be a new distance learner pursuing a university degree outside of the traditional educational structure. It was discovered, for example, that the four kinds of attributions usually tested in attribution research (i.e., effort, ability, luck, and task-difficulty) (Weiner, 1974) were not altogether appropriate for Turkish distance learners, who perceived a wide range of learning conditions to be salient factors in their anticipated success and failure. For example,

one of the attributions, ability, was never mentioned as a cause of either success or failure in discussions or open-ended interviews, even though students were prompted by its inclusion in two multiple-choice items in the Midterm Questionnaire.

The first-year OEF students attributed their success both to effort (which is normally considered an internal cause) and to a variety of positive conditions (which would normally be perceived as external causes), while they attributed their failure primarily to negative conditions in the learning environment (which are seen as external causes). These findings supported other cross-cultural attribution research (e.g., Bond, 1983; Little, 1987; Duda & Allison, 1989), where a variety of responses was obtained in cross-cultural settings when subjects had an opportunity to respond to open-ended questions about their causal attributions.

The tendency to consider causal dimensions that underpin the concept of attributions as bipolar (either internal or external, stable or unstable, and controllable or uncontrollable) was not supported in this study. Under one set of circumstances, for example, students attributed success or failure to a cause that they normally considered stable, internal, and controllable, like effort; yet when the circumstances changed, the attribution became unstable, external, and uncontrollable, due to such environmental conditions as personal problems or exorbitant work demands that influenced the amount of effort expended on studies. This finding is related to the results of research at the Dutch

Open University (Vermunt, 1987) where distance learners' study approaches were found to vary over time.

A factor that further confounds the bipolarity of causal dimensions is the collectivist aspect of the Turkish culture (Hofstede, 1986), whereby interdependence and group ethos influence whether or not students would be likely to attribute success and failure primarily to internal causes or to external causes. A preference for external attributions was found in studies in collectivist cultures including India (Dalal, Sharma, and Bisht, 1983; Miller, 1984) but was not confirmed in other studies in India (Murphy-Berman & Sharma, 1987) or China (Stipek, Weiner, & Li, 1989). Reviews of attribution research in Japan and the United States (Holloway, 1988) and cross-culturally (Duda & Allison, 1989) suggest that in cultures where interpersonal cooperation is fostered, individuals may attribute success and failure to effort more often than to ability, while the reverse may be true in the U.S. where the focus is on competition. Controversy over this issue continues.

Perhaps most importantly, the study demonstrated the complexities of the cross-cultural application of attribution theory in a distance learning context, particularly in a developing country where Islamic influences of patronage and an oral tradition prevail. It further justified the use of case study method for such a study.

In studies of achievement motivation in Japan and China, such cultural antecedents as child-rearing and teaching practices

that foster cooperation appear to influence traditional face-to-face students' attributions, behavior, and achievement levels (Hamilton, Blumenfeld, Akoh, & Miura, 1989; Holloway, 1988). Though it isn't known yet whether the salience of such cultural antecedents persists when students move from a traditional educational setting into a distance education one in which such face-to-face teaching practices are no longer available, the present study indicates that possibility.

Such comparative studies may provide the impetus for developing indigenous theories of attribution. The discussion thus far has focused on the application of a Western-based theory to non-Western cultures. Fletcher and Ward (1988) postulated that Yang and Ho (1988) developed a Chinese theory of *yuan* attributions, which are commonly used to predict outcomes of relationships in Chinese society and are rooted in beliefs of predestination and fatalism. An indigenous theory of attribution may similarly be developed for distance learners in traditional Islamic cultures, particularly in societies where values of patronage and an oral tradition are not as diluted as they tend to be in Turkey, because of the greater emphasis on Western values and modernism. Such a theory would likely incorporate beliefs in *kısmet* (fatalism), the nazar boncuğu (the blue bead talisman), and the importance of a torpil to intervene in an otherwise authoritarian system.

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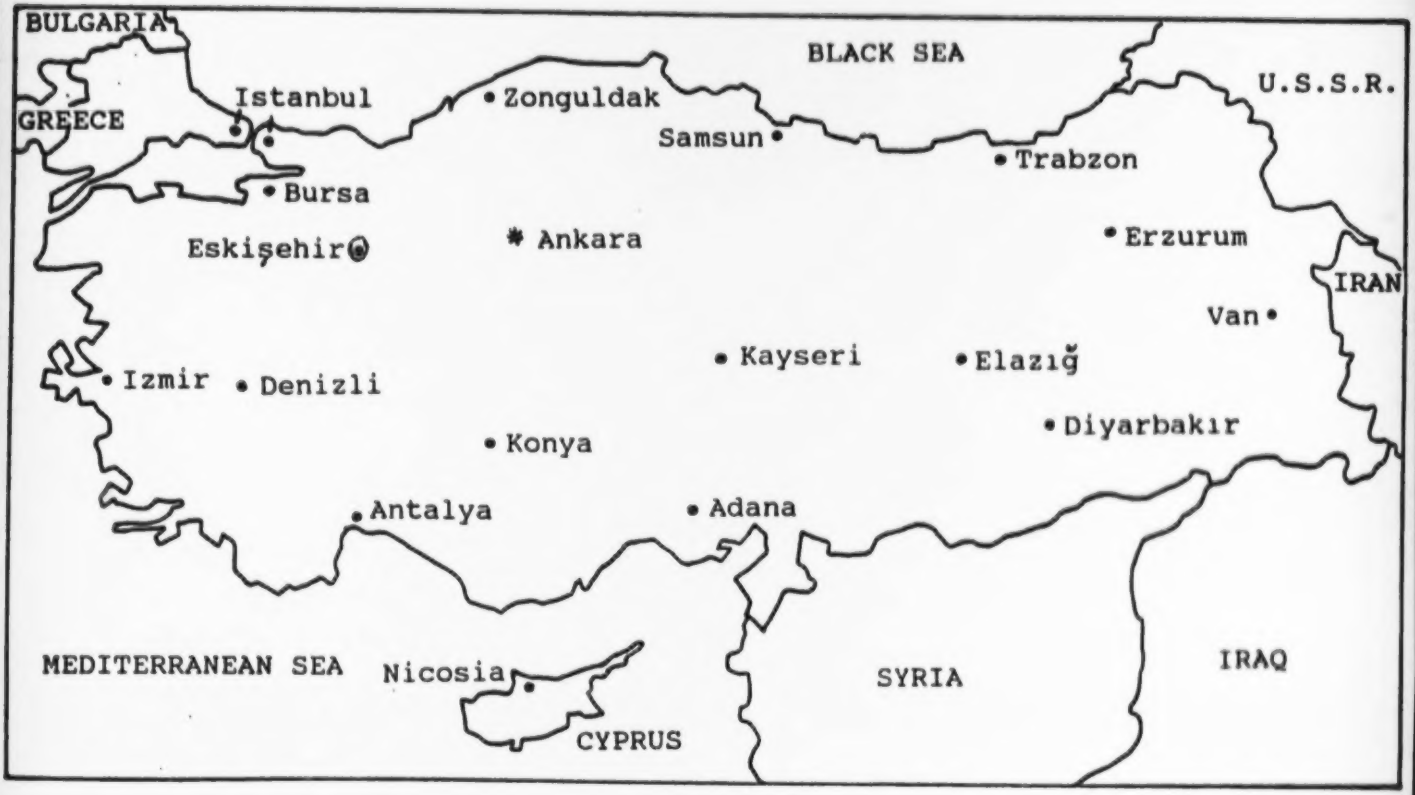
Figure 1 Map of Turkey and the 19 OEF Bureaus



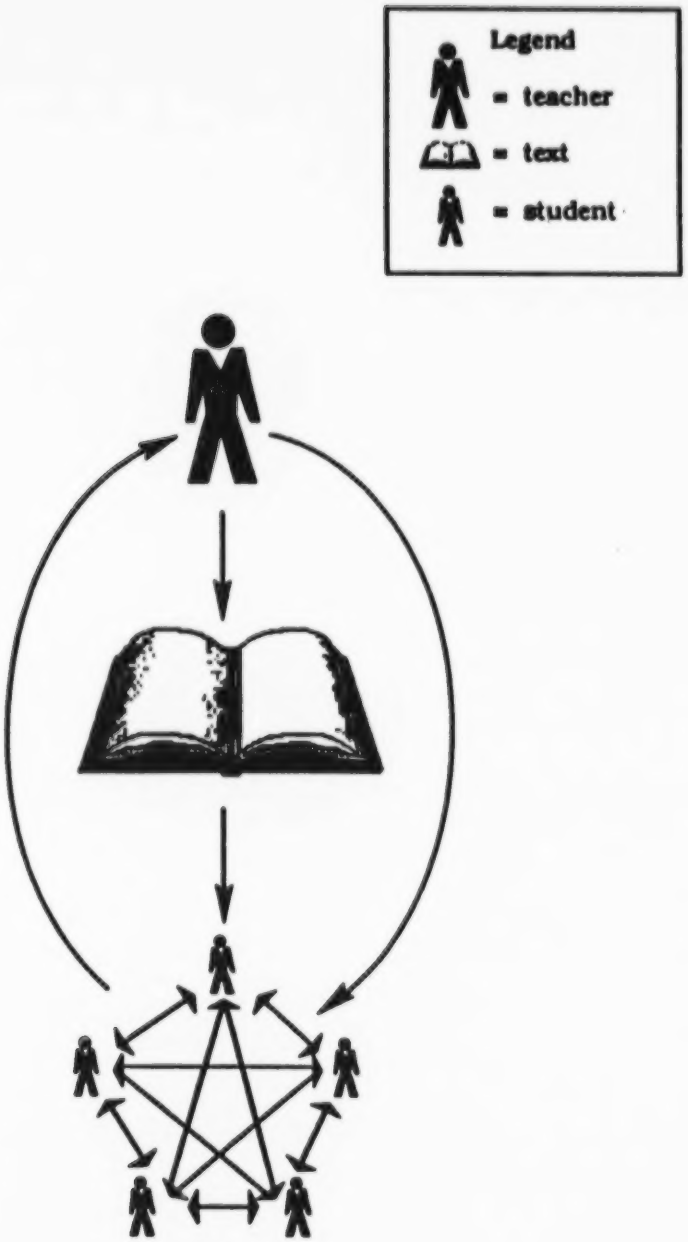


Figure 2 **Traditional (Face-to-Face) Education Model**

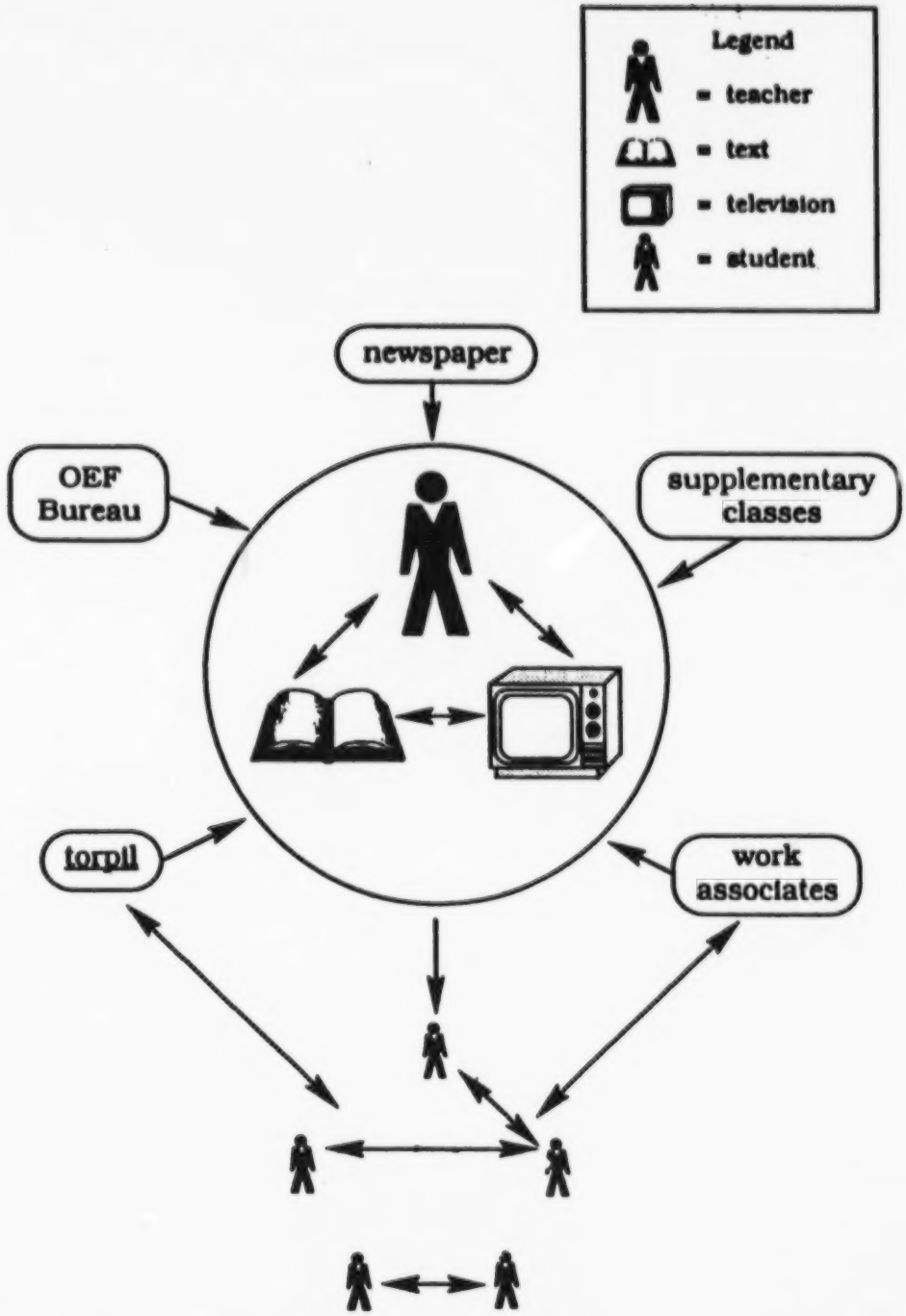


Figure 3 . Turkish Open Education Faculty (Student Perspective)